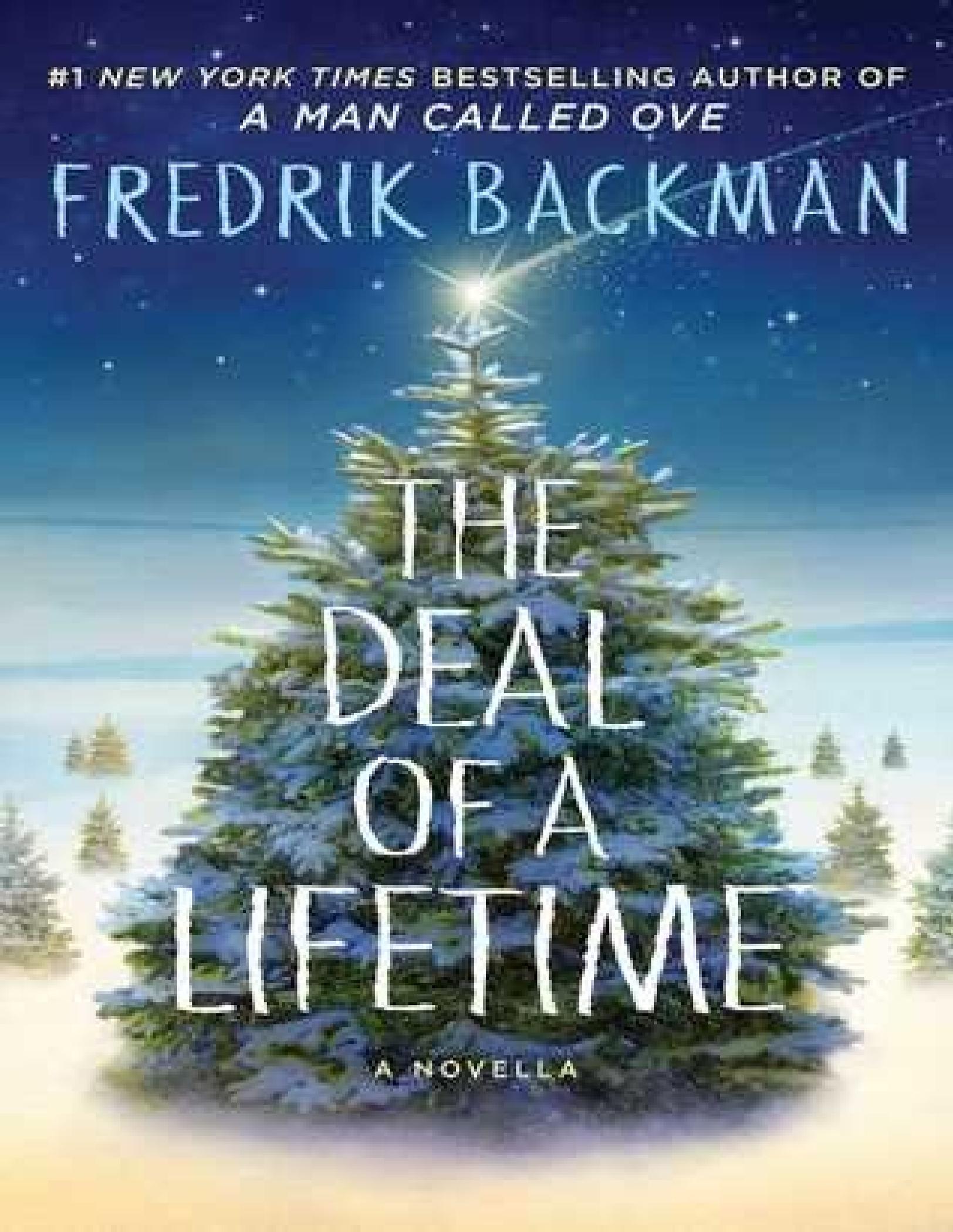


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*A MAN CALLED OVE*

FREDRIK BACKMAN



THE  
DEAL  
OF A  
LIFETIME

A NOVELLA

## A FEW WORDS BEFORE THE REST OF THE WORDS

This is a short story about what you would be prepared to sacrifice in order to save a life. If it was not only your future on the line, but also your past. Not only the places you are going, but the footprints you have left behind. If it was all of it, all of you, who would you give yourself up for?

I wrote this story late one night shortly before Christmas in 2016. My wife and children were sleeping a few arm lengths away. I was very tired; it had been a long and strange year, and I had been thinking a lot about the choices families make. Everyday, everywhere, we go down one road or another. We play around; we stay at home; we fall in love and fall asleep right next to each other. We discover we need someone to sweep us off our feet to realize what time really is.

So I tried to tell a story about that.

It was published in the local newspaper of my hometown, Helsingborg, in the southernmost part of Sweden. All the locations in the story are real—I went to school around the corner from the hospital, and the bar where the characters drink is owned and run by childhood friends of mine. I've

gotten very drunk there on several occasions. If you're ever around Helsingborg, I highly recommend it.

I live six hundred kilometers further north now, in Stockholm, with my family. So, in retrospect, I think this story was not just about how I felt about love and death that night I was sitting on the floor next to the bed my wife and our kids were sleeping in, but also about my feelings for the place where I grew up. Maybe all people have that feeling deep down, that your hometown is something you can never really escape, but can never really go home to, either. Because it's not home anymore. We're not trying to make peace with it. Not with the streets and bricks of it. Just with the person we were back then. And maybe forgive ourselves for everything we thought we would become and didn't.

Maybe you will find this to be a strange story, I don't know. It's not very long, so at least it will be over quickly in that case. But I hope my younger self would have read it and found it to be . . . well . . . not horrible. I think he and I could have gone for a beer. Talked about choices. I would have shown him pictures of my family and he would have said, "Alright. You did alright."

Anyway, this is the story. Thank you for taking the time to read it.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'CB' or 'CBL' written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fredrik Backman

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THE DEAL  
OF A LIFETIME

-a novella-

FREDRIK BACKMAN

*Translated by Alice Menzies*

**ATRIA** BOOKS

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Hi. It's your dad. You'll be waking up soon, it's Christmas Eve morning in Helsingborg, and I've killed a person. That's not how fairy tales usually begin, I know. But I took a life. Does it make a difference if you know whose it was?

Maybe not. Most of us so desperately want to believe that every heart which stops beating is missed equally. If we're asked, "Are all lives worth the same?" the majority of us will reply with a resounding "Yes!" But only until someone points to a person we love and asks: "What about that life?"

Does it make a difference if I killed a good person? A loved person? A valuable life?

If it was a child?



She was five. I met her a week ago. There was a small red chair in the hospital TV room, it was hers. It wasn't red when she arrived, but she could see that it wanted to be. It took twenty-two boxes of crayons but that didn't matter, she could afford it, everyone here gave her crayons all the time. As though she could draw away her illness, color away the needles and the drugs. She knew that wasn't possible, of course, she was a smart kid, but she pretended for their sakes. So she spent her days drawing on paper, because it made all the adults happy. And at night, she colored in the chair. Because it really wanted to be red.

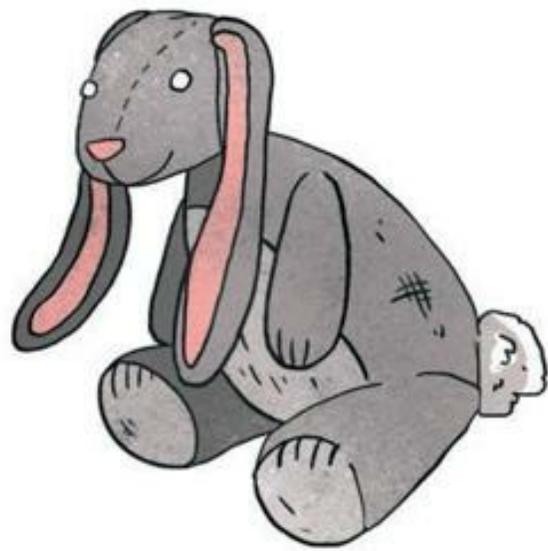
She had a soft toy, a rabbit. She called it "Babbit." When she first learned to speak, the adults thought she was calling it "Babbit" because she couldn't say "Rabbit." But she called it Babbit because Babbit was its name. That shouldn't be so hard to understand, really, even for an adult. Babbit got scared sometimes, and then it got to sit on the red chair. It might not be clinically proven that sitting on a red chair makes you less scared, but Babbit didn't know that.

The girl sat on the floor next to Babbit, patting its paw and telling it stories. One night, I was hidden around a corner in the corridor and I heard her say: "I'm going to die soon, Babbit. Everyone dies, it's just that most people will die in

maybe a hundred thousand years but I might die already tomorrow.” She added, in a whisper: “I hope it’s not tomorrow.”

Then she suddenly looked up in fear, glanced around as though she had heard footsteps in the corridor. She quickly grabbed Babbit and whispered good night to the red chair. “It’s her! She’s coming!” the girl hissed, running toward her room, hiding herself under the covers next to her mother.

I ran too. I’ve been running all my life. Because every night, a woman in a thick, grey, knitted jumper walks the hospital’s corridors. She carries a folder. She has all our names written inside.



It's Christmas Eve, and by the time you wake up the snow will probably have melted. Snow never lasts very long in Helsingborg. It's the only place I know where the wind comes at an angle from below, like it's frisking you. Where the umbrellas protect you better if you hold them upside down. I was born here but I've never gotten used to it; Helsingborg and I will never find peace. Maybe everyone feels that way about their hometown: the place we're from never apologizes, never admits that it was wrong about us. It just sits there, at the end of the motorway, whispering: "You might be all rich and powerful now. And maybe you do come home with expensive watches and fancy clothes. But you can't fool me, because I know who you really are. You're just a scared little boy."

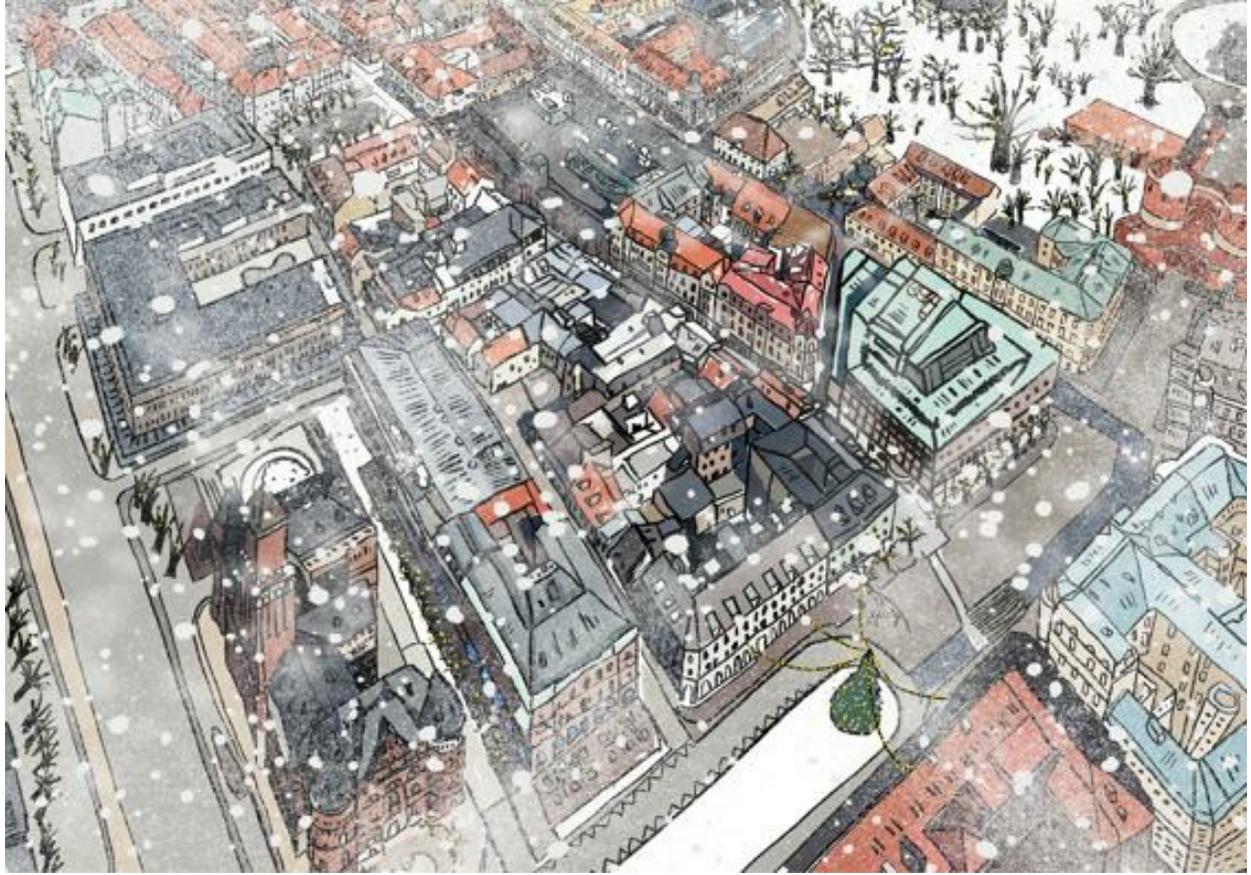
I met death by the side of my wrecked car last night, after the accident. My blood was everywhere. The woman in the grey jumper was standing next to me with a disapproving look on her face and she said: "You shouldn't be here." I was so scared of her, because I'm a winner, a survivor. And all survivors are scared of death. That's why we're still here. My face was cut to shreds, my shoulder out of joint, and I was trapped inside 1.5 million kronors' worth of steel and technology.

When I saw the woman, I shouted, “Take someone else! I can give you someone else to kill!”

But she just leaned forward, looked disappointed, and said: “It doesn’t work like that. I don’t make the decisions. I just look after the logistics and the transportation.”

“For who? For God or the Devil, or . . . someone else?” I sobbed.

She sighed. “I stay out of the politics. I just do my job. Now give me my folder.”



It wasn't the car crash that brought me to the hospital, I was there long before that. Cancer. I'd met the girl for the first time six days earlier, when I was smoking on the fire escape so the nurses wouldn't see me. They went on and on about smoking, as though it would have time to kill me.

The door to the corridor was ajar, and I could hear the girl talking to her mother in the TV room. They played the same game every night; when the hospital was so quiet that you could hear the snowflakes bouncing against the windows like good-night kisses, the mother whispered to the girl: "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

The girl knew the game was for her mother's sake, but she pretended it was for hers. She laughed as she said, "doctor" and "engineeer," plus her perennial favorite: "space hunter."



Once the mother fell asleep in an armchair, the girl stayed where she was, coloring in the chair which wanted to be red and talking to Babbit whose name was that. “Is it cold on death?” she asked Babbit. But Babbit didn’t know. So the girl packed thick gloves in her backpack, just to be on the safe side.

She spotted me through the glass. She wasn’t scared, I remember being furious at her parents for that. What kind of adult doesn’t raise their kid to be terrified of a strange, forty-five-year-old, chain-smoking bloke who’s staring at her from a fire escape? But this girl wasn’t scared. She waved. I waved back. She grabbed Babbit’s paw, came over to the door and spoke through the crack.

“Do you have cancer too?”

“Yes,” I replied. Because that was the truth.

“Are you famous? You’re in a picture in Mummy’s newspaper.”

“Yes,” I replied. Because that was also the truth. The papers wrote about my money, no one knew I was ill yet, but I’m the kind of person whose diagnosis will make the news. I’m not an ordinary person, everyone will hear about it when I die. When five-year-old girls die, no one writes about that, there aren’t any memorials in the evening papers, their feet are still too small, they haven’t had time to make anyone care about their footsteps yet. But people care about me because of what I’ll leave behind, what I’ve built and achieved, businesses and properties and assets. Money isn’t

money to me, not like it is to you. I save and calculate and don't worry about it. It's nothing but points for me, just a measure of my success.

"It's not the same cancer you have," I said to the girl. Because that was my only consolation in the diagnosis. That the doctor had apologetically explained: "You have a very, very unusual type of cancer."

I don't even get cancer like you people.

The girl blinked firmly and asked: "Is it cold on death?"

"I don't know," I said.

I should have said something else. Something bigger. But I'm not that man. So I just dropped my cigarette and mumbled: "You should stop drawing on the furniture."

I know what you're thinking: what a bastard I am. And you're right. But the vast majority of successful people don't become bastards, we were bastards long before. That's why we've been successful.

"You're allowed to draw on the furniture when you have cancer," the girl suddenly exclaimed with a shrug. "No one says anything."

I don't know what it was about that, but I started to laugh. When had I last done that? She laughed too. Then she and Babbit ran off to their room.

It's so easy to kill someone, all a person like me needs is a car and a few seconds. Because people like you trust me, you drive thousands of kilos of metal at hundreds of kilometers an hour, hurtling through the darkness with the people you love most sleeping in the backseat, and when someone like me approaches from the opposite direction, you trust that I don't have bad brakes. That I'm not looking for my phone between the seats, not driving too fast, not drifting between lanes because I'm blinking the tears from my eyes. That I'm not sitting on the slip road to the 111 with my headlights out, just waiting for a lorry. You trust me. That I'm not drunk. That I'm not going to kill you.

The woman with the grey sweater pulled me out of the wreckage this morning. She wiped my blood from her folder.

"Kill someone . . . else," I begged.

She took a resigned breath through her nose.

"It doesn't work like that. I don't have that kind of influence. I can't just swap a death for a death. I have to swap a life for a life."

"Do it, then!" I screamed.

The woman shook her head sadly, reached out and pulled a cigarette from my breast pocket. It was bent, but not

broken. She smoked it in two long drags.

“I’ve actually given up,” she said defensively.

I lay bleeding on the ground and pointed to the folder.

“Is my name in there?”

“Everyone’s is.”

“What do you mean, *a life for a life?*”

She groaned.

“You really are an idiot. You always have been.”



At one point in time, you were mine. My son.

The girl at the hospital reminded me of you. Something happened when you were born. You cried so loudly, and it was the first time it had happened to me: the first time I'd felt pain for someone else. I couldn't stay with someone who had that kind of power over me.

Every parent will take five minutes in the car outside the house from time to time, just sitting there. Just breathing and gathering the strength to head back inside to all of their responsibilities. The suffocating expectation of being good, coping. Every parent will take ten seconds in the stairwell occasionally, key in hand, not putting it in the lock. I was honest, I only waited a moment before I ran. I spent your entire childhood travelling. You were the girl's age when you asked what I did. I told you I made money. You said everyone did that. I said, "No, the majority of people just survive, they think their things have a value but nothing does. Things only have a price, based on expectation, and I do business with that. The only thing of value on Earth is time. One second will always be a second, there's no negotiating with that."

You despise me now, because I've devoted all my seconds to my work. But I have, at least, devoted them to something.

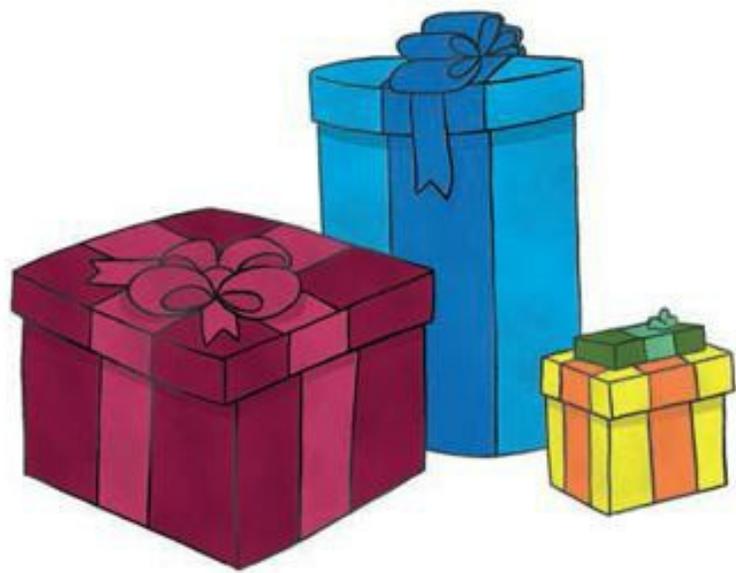
What have your friends' parents devoted their lives to? Barbecues and rounds of golf? Charter holidays and TV shows? What will they leave behind?

You hate me now, but you were once mine. You once sat on my lap and were terrified of the starry sky. Someone had told you that the stars aren't really above us but below, and that the earth spun so quickly that if you were small and light you could easily fall off, straight into all that darkness. The porch door was open, your mother was listening to Leonard Cohen, so I told you that we actually lived deep in a cozy grotto and that the sky was like a stone covering the opening. "Then what are the stars?" you asked, and I told you they were cracks, through which the light could trickle in. Then I said that your eyes were the same thing, to me. Tiny, tiny cracks, through which the light could trickle out. You laughed so loudly then. Have you ever laughed like that since? I laughed too. I, who had wanted to live a life high above everyone else, ended up with a son who would rather live deep beneath the surface.

In the living room, your mother turned up the volume and danced, laughing, on the other side of the window. You crawled higher in my lap. We were a family then, albeit fleetingly. I belonged to you both, for a moment or two.

I know you wished you had an ordinary father. One who didn't travel, wasn't famous, one who would have been happy with just two eyes on him: yours. You never wanted to say your surname and hear, "Sorry, but is your dad . . . ?" But

I was too important for that. I didn't take you to school, didn't hold your hand, didn't help you blow out your birthday candles, I never fell asleep in your bed, halfway through our fourth bedtime story, with your cheek on my collarbone. But you'll have everything that everyone else longs for: Wealth. Freedom. I abandoned you, but at least I abandoned you at the top of the hierarchy of needs.



But you don't care about that, do you? You're your mother's son. She was smarter than me, I never quite forgave her for that. She also felt more than me, that was her weakness, and it meant I could hurt her with words. You might not remember when she left me, you were still so small, but the truth is that I didn't even notice. I came home after a trip and it took me two days to realize that neither of you was there.

Several years later, when you were eleven or twelve, the two of you had a huge argument about something and you took a bus to my house in the middle of the night and said you wanted to live with me. I said no. You were completely beside yourself, sobbing and crying on the rug in my hallway, screaming that it wasn't fair.

I looked you in the eye and said: "Life isn't fair."

You bit your lip. Lowered your eyes and replied: "Lucky for you."

You might have stopped being mine that day, I don't know. Maybe that's when I lost you. If that's the case, I was wrong. If that's the case, life is fair.

Four nights ago, the girl knocked on the window again.

“Do you want to play?” she asked.

“What?” I said.

“I’m bored. Do you want to play?”

I told her she should go to bed. Because I’m the person you think I am, the kind of person who says no when a dying five-year-old wants to play. She and Babbit went off towards her room, but the girl turned around and looked at me and asked: “Are you brave too?”

“What?”

“Everyone always says I’m so brave.”

Her eyelids fluttered. So I replied honestly: “Don’t be brave. If you’re scared, be scared. All survivors are.”

“Are you? Of the woman with the folder?”

I took a calm drag on my cigarette, nodded slowly.

“Me too,” said the girl.



She and Babbit walked towards her room. I don't know what happened then. Maybe I cracked, making all the light spill out. Or in. I'm not evil, even I understand that cancer should have an age limit. So I opened my mouth and said: "Not tonight. I'll stay here and keep watch, so she doesn't come tonight."

The girl smiled then.

The next morning, I was sitting awake on the floor in the corridor. I heard the girl and her mother playing a new game. The mother asked, "Who do you want to invite to your next birthday party?" even though there wouldn't be a next one. And the girl played along, reeled off the names of everyone she loved. It's a long list when you're five. That morning, I was on it.

I'm an egoist, you learnt that early on. Your mother once screamed that I'm the kind of person who doesn't have any equals, I only have people above me that I want something from and people beneath me who I trample on. She was right, so I kept going until there was no one left above me.

But just how big is my egoism? You know that I can buy and sell everything, but would I clamber over dead bodies? Would I kill someone?

I had a brother. I've never told you that. He was dead when we were born. Maybe there was only room for one of us on this earth, and I wanted it more. I clambered over my brother in the womb. I was a winner, even then.

The woman with the folder was there, at the hospital. I've seen the pictures. Sometimes, when my mother drank alone at night, she fell asleep too drunk to remember to hide them. The woman was everywhere in those photos, an out of focus figure outside windows, a blur in the corridors. In one from the day before our birth, she was standing in the queue behind my parents at a petrol station. Mum was heavily pregnant. Dad was laughing in that picture. I never saw him do that. Throughout my life, he only ever smiled.

When I was five, I saw the woman with the folder by some train tracks. I was about to cross when she leapt forward

from the other side and shouted something. I stopped dead, astonished. The train appeared a second later, thundering by so close that I fell over. By the time it had passed, she was gone.

When I was fifteen, my best friend and I were playing on the rocks by the sea in Kullaberg and halfway up we passed a woman in a grey sweater. “Be careful, these rocks are treacherous when it rains,” she mumbled. I didn’t recognize her until she was already gone.



It started raining half an hour later, and my best friend fell headlong. The rain was still falling during his funeral, as though it never planned to stop. I saw the woman as I was leaving the church, she was standing beneath an umbrella in the square, but the rain was still flecking her cheeks, the way it only does in Helsingborg.

When my dad got sick, I saw her outside his room in the care home, on his last night. I came out of the toilet, she didn't notice me. She was wearing the same grey sweater, writing something in her folder with a black pencil. Then she went into his room and never came out again. Dad was dead the next morning.

When my mum got sick, I was working abroad. We spoke on the phone, she was so weak when she whispered: "The doctor says everything looks normal." So that I wouldn't worry about her dying a dramatic death. My parents always wanted everything to be like normal. Ever since my brother died, they just wanted to be like everyone else. Maybe that's why I became exceptional, out of sheer obstinacy. Mum passed away during the night, I hired an appraiser to go through her flat and her possessions; he sent me photos. In one of them, from the bedroom, there was a black pencil on the floor. By the time I got home, it was gone. Mum's

slippers were in the hallway, and there were small clumps of grey wool on their soles.



I failed with you. Fathers are meant to teach their sons about life, but you were a disappointment.

You called me on my birthday last autumn, I was forty-five. You had just turned twenty. You told me that you'd got a job in the old Tivoli building. The city had moved the entire building right across the square to make room for new private flats. You said the word "private" with such disgust, because we're so different. You see history, I see development, you see nostalgia, I see weakness. I could have given you a job, could have given you hundreds of jobs, but you wanted to be a bartender at Vinylbaren, in a building that had been ready to fall down even when it was a steamboat station four generations earlier. I bluntly asked you whether you were happy. Because I am who I am. And you replied: "It's good enough, Dad. Good enough." Because you knew I hated that phrase. You were always someone who could be happy. You don't know how much of a blessing that is.

Maybe it was your mother who forced you to call; I think she suspected I was sick, but you invited me down to the bar. You said they served *smørrebrød* in the café; you remembered that I always used to eat it when you and I took the ferry to Denmark at Christmas when you were small.

Your mother had nagged me to do something special with you, at least once a year, I think you know that. But I couldn't sit still and talk, I needed to be on the way somewhere, and you got travel sick in the car. So we liked the ferry, both of us, me the way there and you the way back. I loved leaving everything behind, but you loved standing out on deck and watching Helsingborg appear on the horizon. The way home, the silhouette of something you recognized. You loved it.

I sat in my car in Hamntorget last autumn, saw you through the window of the bar. You were making cocktails and making people laugh. I didn't go in, I was afraid I would end up telling you that I had cancer. I wouldn't have been able to deal with your compassion. And I was drunk, of course, so I remembered the steps outside the house where you and your mother lived, and all the times you had sat there waiting for me when I didn't turn up like I'd promised. All the occasions I'd wasted your time. I remembered the ferries at Christmas, always early in the morning so that we would get home in time for me to spend the rest of the day drinking. Our last trip was when you were fourteen, I taught you to play poker in a basement bar in Helsingør, showed you how to identify the losers at a table: weak men with strong schnapps. I taught you to capitalize on those who couldn't understand the game. You won six hundred kronor. I wanted to keep playing, but you gave me a pleading look and said, "Six hundred's good enough, Dad."





You stopped at a jewelry shop on the way back to the ferry and bought some earrings with the money. It took me a whole year to realize that they weren't for some girl you were trying to charm. They were for your mother.

You never played poker again.

I failed with you. I tried to make you tough. You ended up kind.



late last night, at the hospital, the woman with the folder came walking down the corridor. She stopped when she saw me. I didn't run. I remembered all the times I had seen her before. When she took my brother away. When she took my best friend. When she took my parents. I wasn't going to be scared anymore, I'd keep that power at least, down to the last moment.

"I know who you are," I said, without a single tremor in my voice. "You're death."

The woman frowned and looked deeply, deeply offended. "I'm not death," she muttered. "I'm *not* my job."

That knocked the air out of me. I'll admit it. It's not what you expect to hear at a moment like that.

The woman's eyebrows lowered as she repeated: "I'm not death. I just do the picking up and dropping off."

"I—" I began, but she interrupted me.

"You're so self-obsessed that you think I've been chasing you all your life. But I've been looking out for you. Of all the idiots I could have picked as my favorite . . ." She massaged her temples.

"Fa . . . favorite?" I stuttered.

She reached out and touched my shoulder. Her fingers were cold, they moved down towards my breast pocket and

took a cigarette. She lit it, clutched her folder tight. Maybe it was just the smoke, but a lonely tear ran down her cheek as she whispered: “It’s against the rules for us to have favorites. It makes us dangerous, if we do. But sometimes . . . sometimes we have bad days at work too. You screamed so loudly when I came to get your brother, and I turned around and happened to look you in the eye. We’re not meant to do that.”

My voice broke when I asked: “Did you know . . . everything I’ve become, everything I’ve achieved . . . did you know? Was that why you took my brother instead of me?” She shook her head. “It doesn’t work like that. We don’t know the future, we just do our job. But I made a mistake with you. I looked you in the eye and it . . . hurt. We’re not meant to hurt.”

“Did I kill my brother?” I sniffed.

“No,” she said.

I sobbed despairingly. “Then why did you take him? Why do you take everyone I love?”

She gently placed her hand in my hair. Whispered: “It’s not down to us who goes and who stays. That’s why it’s against the rules for us to hurt.”

When the doctor gave me the diagnosis, I didn't have an awakening, I just did my accounts. Everything I'd built, the footprints I've left behind. Weak people always look at people like me and say, "He's rich, but is he *happy*?" As though that was a relevant measure of anything. Happiness is for children and animals, it doesn't have any biological function. Happy people don't create anything, their world is one without art and music and skyscrapers, without discoveries and innovations. All leaders, all of your heroes, they've been obsessed. Happy people don't get obsessed, they don't devote their lives to curing illnesses or making planes take off. The happy leave nothing behind. They live for the sake of living, they're only on earth as consumers. Not me.

But something happened. I walked along the beach out by Råå, the morning after the diagnosis, and I saw two dogs running into the sea, playing in the waves. And I wondered: Have you ever been like that, as happy as they are? Could you be that happy? Would it be worth it?



The woman lifted her hand from my hair. She seemed almost ashamed.

“We’re not meant to feel things. But I’m not . . . just my job. I have . . . interests too. I knit.”

She gestured to her grey sweater. I tried to nod appreciatively, because it felt like she expected it. She nodded back with smoke in her eyes. I took the deepest breath of my life.

“I know you’re here to collect me now. And I’m ready to die,” I managed. As though it were a prayer. And then she said the one thing I feared even more: “I’m not here for you. Not yet. You’ll find out tomorrow that you’re healthy. You’ll live for a long while yet, you’ll have time to achieve whatever you want.”

I trembled. Hugged myself like a child and sobbed. “Then what are you doing here?”

“My job.”

She patted me gently on the cheek. Then she walked off down the corridor, stopped outside a door and opened her folder. Slowly pulled out a black pencil and crossed out a name. Then she opened the door to the girl’s room.



The day before yesterday, I heard the girl and her mother arguing. The girl wanted to make a milk-carton dinosaur, but there wasn't time. The girl got angry, the mother cried. The girl stopped then, the corners of her mouth jumping over the despair leaving her eyes as though it was a skipping rope, and she held her mother's hand and said: "Okay, then. But what about a game?"

They had one where they pretended to talk on the phone. The mother said she had been taken captive by pirates, that she was on her way to their secret island to help the pirates build a flying pirate ship, and in exchange they would sail her home again. The girl laughed and forced her mother to promise that they would build a milk-carton dinosaur *then!* After that, the girl explained that she was on a space ship with "alianies." "Aliens," her mother corrected her. "Alianies," the girl corrected. "They've got mysterious machines with huge buttons and they stick wires into my arms and they have masks over their faces and uniforms that rustle and you can only see their heads. And they whisper, 'There there, there there, there there,' and then they count down from ten. And when they get to one you go to sleep. Even though you try not to!"

The girl fell silent, because the mother was crying then, even though it was just a game. So the girl whispered: “The alianies will save me, Mummy. They’re the best.”

The mother tried not to kiss her a million times. The nurses came and lifted the girl onto the rolling bed to take her to the operating theater. They passed mysterious machines with huge buttons. The girl had wires stuck to her arms and the alianies wore uniforms which rustled and masks over their faces and when they leaned over the edge of the bed all she could see was their heads. They whispered, “There there, there there, there there,” and then counted down from ten. And when they got to one, the girl fell asleep. Even though she tried not to.



It's bloody awful to admit to yourself that you're not the kind of person you've always thought you were. All you normal people would have tried to save the child if you could, wouldn't you? Of course you would. So when the woman with the grey sweater opened the door to the girl's room, part of me cracked, because it turns out that I'm more normal than I thought. I shoved the woman, grabbed the folder, and then I ran. As though I were one of you.

My car was parked outside the hospital; the brake lights never came on. The wheels grappled for something to cling onto in the snow. I drove down Bergaliden toward town, and then took Strandvägen north, toward the sea. The most beautiful stretch in the world. I thundered between the trees by Sofiero Castle, towards the terraced houses in Laröd, and didn't slow down before I reached the 111. There, on the slip road to the bigger road, I stopped and turned off the headlights. As the lorry approached, I drove straight out. I don't remember the crash, just the pain in my ears and the light which washed over me as the steel crumpled like foil. And the blood, everywhere.

The woman dragged both me and the folder out of the wreck. When I shouted, "I can give you someone else to kill!"

she realized that I meant myself. But it made no difference. She couldn't take a death for a death. Only a life for a life.

I lay there on the ground with all of Helsingborg's winds beneath my clothes, and she patiently explained: "It's not enough for you to die. To make room for the girl's entire life, another life has to cease to exist. I have to delete its contents. So if you give your life, it'll disappear. You won't die, you'll never have existed. No one will remember you. You were never here."

A life for a life. That's what it means.

That was why she brought me to you. She had to show me what I was giving up.



An hour ago, we were standing in Hamntorget watching you clean the bar through the window. “You never get your child’s attention back,” your mother once said. “The time when they don’t just listen to you to be nice, that time passes, it’s the first thing to go.”

The woman stood beside me and pointed at you. “If you give your life for the girl at the hospital, you’ll never have been his.”

I blinked, out of step.

“If I die . . .”

“You won’t die,” she corrected me. “You’ll be erased.”

“But . . . if I don’t . . . If I’ve never . . .”

She wearily shook her head at my lack of understanding. “Your son will still exist, but he’ll have a different father. Everything you’ll leave behind will still exist, but it’ll have been built by someone else. Your footprints will vanish, you’ll never have existed. You humans always think you’re ready to give your lives, but only until you understand what that really involves. You’re obsessed with your legacy, aren’t you? You can’t bear to die and be forgotten.”

I didn’t answer for quite some time. I thought about whether you would have done it, given your life for someone else. You probably would. Because you’re your

mother's son, and she's already given a life. The one she could have lived if she hadn't lived for you and for me.

I turned to the woman. "I've sat here watching him every evening since I got sick."

She nodded. "I know."

I knew that she knew. I'd understood that much by now. "Every night, I wondered whether it was possible to change a person."

"What did you conclude?"

"That we are who we are."



She started walking straight toward you then. I panicked. “Where are you going?” I shouted.

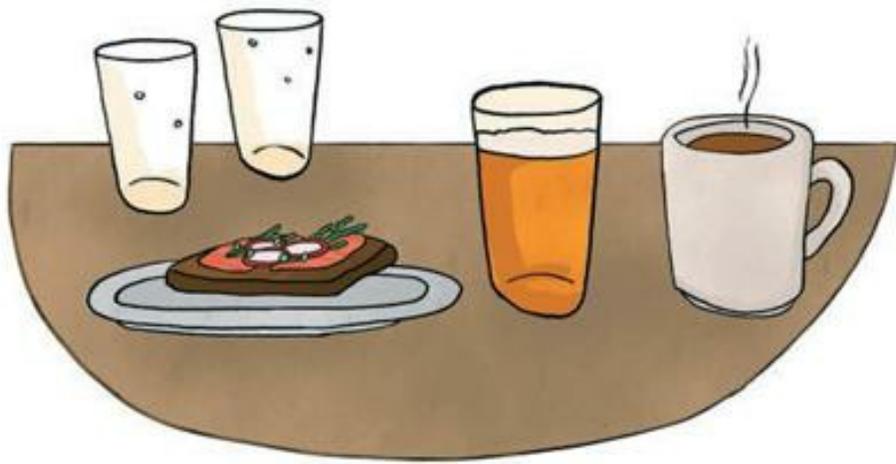
“I need to be sure that you’re sure,” she replied, crossing the car park and knocking on the door of Vinylbaren.

I ran after her and hissed: “Can he see us?”

I don’t know what I was expecting. The woman turned to me, mockingly raised one eyebrow and replied: “I’m not a bloody ghost. Of course he can see us!”

When you opened the door, she muttered, “I need a beer,” without paying any attention as you patiently—like your mother would have done—tried to explain that unfortunately the bar was closed. Then you saw me. I think both of our worlds probably came to a standstill right then.

You didn't say anything about my ripped suit, or the blood on my face, you'd seen me in a worse state before. The woman in the grey sweater ate smørrebrød and drank three beers in a row, but I asked for a coffee. I saw how happy that made you. We said very little, because there was too much I wanted to say. That's always when we fall silent. You wiped the bar and sorted the glasses, and I thought about the love in your hands. You've always touched the things you like as though they had a pulse. You cared about that bar, adored this town. The people and the buildings and the night as it approached over the Sound. Even the wind and the useless soccer team. This has always been your town in a way it never was for me; you never tried to find a life, you were in the right place from the start.



I told the woman in the grey sweater what you had told me: that they had moved the entire Tivoli building right across the square. That's what fathers do, they sit in front of their sons and tell their son's stories to a third person rather than letting them speak for themselves. The woman looked at me for intervals which were far too short between blinks.

"You don't care?" I asked.

"I really, really, really don't," she replied.

And you laughed then. Loudly. It made me sing inside.

I asked questions, you answered. You told me that you had designed everything in the bar with respect for the building's history. It showed. I should have told you that. Not for your sake, because you won't remember any of this, but for mine. I should have told you I was proud.

You cleared everything away and I followed you, awkwardly, clutching my coffee cup. You turned around to take it, and our hands briefly overlapped. I felt your heart beat, right in the ends of your fingertips.

You glanced at the woman in the bar, she was reading the cocktail menu and had paused on one containing "gin, lime, pastis, and triple sec." Its name was *Corpse Reviver No. 3*. She laughed at that, and then you laughed too, though you found it funny for completely different reasons.

"I'm glad you've met someone who's . . . you know . . . your own age," you said quietly to me.

I didn't know what to reply. So I didn't.

You smiled and kissed me on the cheek. "Merry

Christmas, Dad.”

My heart fell to the floor and you walked through the door into the kitchen. I couldn't bring myself to let you come back. A second is always a second; that's the one definitive value we have on earth. Everyone is always negotiating, all of the time. You're doing the deal of your life, every day. This was mine.

The woman drank the last of her beer. Picked up the folder from the bar. We went to the outdoor seating area; there's fierce competition for the most beautiful view in Helsingborg, but that particular place is so calm and confident. It doesn't need to show off, it knows its own beauty. The waves rolling in, the ferries anchored in the harbor, Denmark waiting on the other side of the water.

“How does this work?” I asked.

“We jump inwards,” the woman replied.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

She nodded sadly.

“I'm scared,” I admitted, but she shook her head.

“You're not scared. You're just grieving. No one tells you humans that your sorrow feels like fear.”

“What are we grieving?”

“Time.”

I nodded toward the windows in the bar and whispered: “Will he remember anything?”

She shook her head. “Sometimes, for a second, he might feel like there's something missing. But . . . then . . .” She

clicked her fingers.

“And the girl?”

“She’ll live her life.”

“Will you keep watch over them?”

The woman nodded slowly. “I’ve never liked the rules anyway.”

I buttoned my jacket. The wind was blowing at an angle from below. “Is it cold . . . where we’re going?” I asked.

But the woman didn’t reply. She just handed me a pair of knitted gloves. They were grey, but there was a single thin red thread hanging from one of them. She pulled a small pair of scissors from one of her pockets and carefully cut it away. Then she held my hands as we jumped inwards. You’ll never read this. You’ve never sat waiting on the steps outside your mother’s house. I’ve never wasted your time.



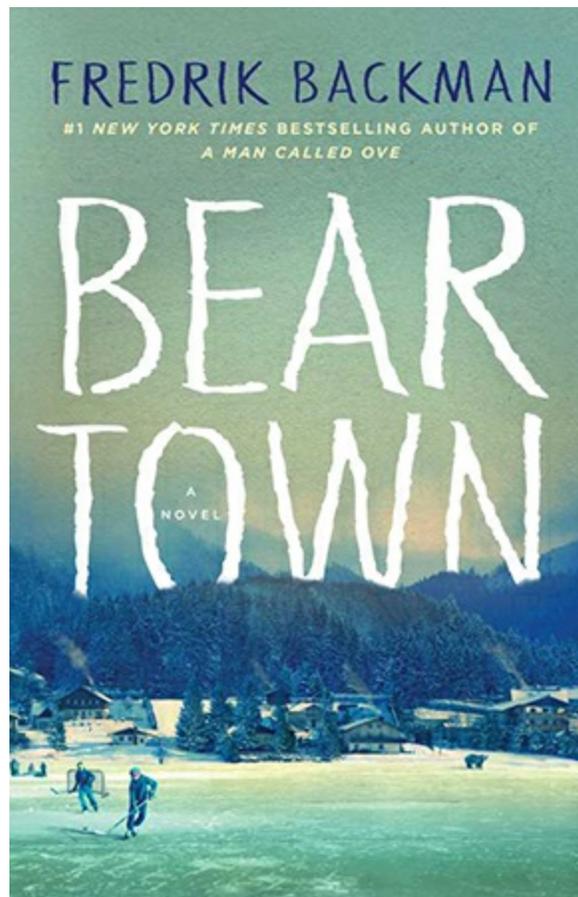
And as we jumped inwards, the woman with the folder and I, I saw Helsingborg as you've always seen it, for the briefest of moments. Like the silhouette of something you recognize. A home. It was our town then, finally, yours and mine.

And that was good enough.

You'll wake up soon. It's Christmas Eve morning. And I loved you.

Read an excerpt from Fredrick Backman’s *BEARTOWN*, a story “Fully packed with wise insights into the human experience”—*The Washington Post*

Turn the page for a preview of



*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.*

It's a Friday in early March in Beartown and nothing has happened yet. Everyone is waiting. Tomorrow, the Beartown Ice Hockey Club's junior team is playing in the semifinal of the biggest youth tournament in the country. How important can something like that be? In most places, not so important, of course. But Beartown isn't most places.

*Bang. Bang. Bang-bang-bang.*

The town wakes early, like it does every day; small towns need a head start if they're going to have any chance in the world. The rows of cars in the parking lot outside the factory are already covered with snow; people are standing in silent lines with their eyes half-open and their minds half-closed, waiting for their electronic punch cards to verify their existence to the clocking-in machine. They stamp the slush off their boots with autopilot eyes and answering-machine voices while they wait for their drug of choice—caffeine or nicotine or sugar—to kick in and render their bodies at least tolerably functional until the first break.

Out on the road the commuters set off for bigger towns beyond the forest; their gloves slam against heating vents and their curses are the sort you only think of uttering when you're drunk, dying, or sitting in a far-too-cold Peugeot far too early in the morning.

\* \* \*

If they keep quiet they can hear it in the distance: *Bang-bang-bang. Bang. Bang.*

\* \* \*

Maya wakes up and stays in bed, playing her guitar. The walls of her room are covered in a mixture of pencil drawings and tickets she's saved from concerts she's been to in cities far from here. Nowhere near as many as she would have liked, but considerably more than her parents actually consented to. She loves everything about her guitar—its weight against her body, the way the wood responds when her fingertips tap it, the strings that cut hard against her skin. The simple notes, the gentle riffs—it's all a wonderful game to her. She's fifteen years old and has already fallen in love many times, but her guitar will always be her first love. It's helped her to put up with living in this town, to deal with being the daughter of the general manager of an ice hockey team in the forest.

She hates hockey but understands her father's love for it; the sport is just a different instrument from hers. Her mom sometimes whispers in her daughter's ear: "Never trust people who don't have something in their lives that they love beyond all reason." Her mom loves a man who loves a place that loves a game. This is a hockey town, and there are plenty of things you can say about those, but at least they're predictable. You know what to expect if you live here. Day after day after day.

*Bang.*

Beartown isn't close to anything. Even on a map the place looks unnatural. "As if a drunk giant tried to piss his name in the snow," some might say. "As if nature and man were fighting a tug-of-war for space," more high-minded souls might suggest. Either way, the town is losing. It has been a very long time since it won at anything. More jobs disappear each year, and with them the people, and the forest devours one or two more abandoned houses each season. Back in the days when there were still things to boast about, the city council erected a sign beside the road at the entrance to the town with the sort of slogan that was popular at the time: "Beartown—Leaves You Wanting More!" The wind and snow took a few years to wipe out the word "More." Sometimes the entire community feels like a philosophical experiment: If a town falls in the forest but no one hears it, does it matter at all?

To answer that question you need to walk a few hundred yards down toward the lake. The building you see there doesn't look like much, but it's an ice rink,

built by factory workers four generations ago, men who worked six days a week and needed something to look forward to on the seventh. All the love this town could thaw out was passed down and still seems to end up devoted to the game: ice and boards, red and blue lines, sticks and pucks and every ounce of determination and power in young bodies hurtling at full speed into the corners in the hunt for those pucks. The stands are packed every weekend, year after year, even though the team's achievements have collapsed in line with the town's economy. And perhaps that's why—because everyone hopes that when the team's fortunes improve again, the rest of the town will get pulled up with it.

Which is why places like this always have to pin their hopes for the future on young people. They're the only ones who don't remember that things actually used to be better. That can be a blessing. So they've coached their junior team with the same values their forebears used to construct their community: work hard, take the knocks, don't complain, keep your mouth shut, and show the bastards in the big cities where we're from. There's not much worthy of note around here. But anyone who's been here knows that it's a hockey town.

*Bang.*

Amat will soon turn sixteen. His room is so tiny that if it had been in a larger apartment in a well-to-do neighborhood in a big city, it would barely have registered as a closet. The walls are completely covered with posters of NHL players, with two exceptions. One is a photograph of himself aged seven, wearing gloves that are too big for him and with his helmet halfway down his forehead, the smallest of all the boys on the ice. The other is a sheet of white paper on which his mother has written parts of a prayer. When Amat was born, she lay with him on her chest in a narrow bed in a little hospital on the other side of the planet, no one but them in the whole world. A nurse had whispered the prayer in his mother's ear back then—it is said to have been written on the wall above Mother Teresa's bed—and the nurse hoped it would give the solitary woman strength and hope. Almost sixteen years later, the scrap of paper is still hanging on her son's wall, the words mixed up, but she wrote them down as well as she could remember them:

*If you are honest, people may deceive you. Be honest anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfishness. Be kind anyway.  
All the good you do today will be forgotten by others tomorrow. Do good  
anyway.*

Amat sleeps with his skates by his bed every night. “Must have been one hell of a birth for your poor mother, you being born with those on,” the caretaker at the rink often jokes. He’s offered to let the boy keep them in a locker in the team’s storeroom, but Amat likes carrying them there and back. Wants to keep them close.

Amat has never been as tall as the other players, has never been as muscular as them, has never shot as hard. But no one in the town can catch him. No one on any team he’s encountered so far has been as fast as him. He can’t explain it; he assumes it’s a bit like when people look at a violin and some of them just see a load of wood and screws where others see music. Skates have never felt odd to him. On the contrary, when he sticks his feet in a pair of normal shoes he feels like a sailor stepping ashore.

The final lines his mother wrote on the sheet of paper on his wall read as follows:

*What you create, others can destroy. Create anyway. Because in the end, it  
is between you and God. It was never between you and anyone else  
anyway.*

Immediately below that, written in red crayon in the determined handwriting of a primary school student, it says:

*They say Im to little to play. Become good player any way!*

*Bang.*

Once upon a time, Beartown Ice Hockey’s A-team—one step above the juniors—was second-best in the top division in the country. That was more than two decades and three divisions ago, but tomorrow Beartown will be playing against the best once more. So how important can a junior game be? How much can a town care about the semifinal a bunch of teenagers are playing in a minor-league

tournament? Not so much, of course. If it weren't this particular dot on the map.

A couple of hundred yards south of the road sign lies "the Heights," a small cluster of expensive houses with views across the lake. The people who live in them own supermarkets, run factories, or commute to better jobs in bigger towns where their colleagues at staff parties wonder, wide-eyed: "Beartown? How can you possibly live that far out in the forest?" They reply something about hunting and fishing, proximity to nature, but these days almost everyone is asking themselves if it *is* actually possible. Living here any longer. Asking themselves if there's anything left, apart from property values that seem to fall as rapidly as the temperature.

\* \* \*

Then they wake up to the sound of a *bang*. And they smile.

For more than ten years now the neighbors have grown accustomed to the noises from the Erdahl family's garden: *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Then a brief pause while Kevin collects the pucks. Then *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. He was two and a half years old the first time he put a pair of skates on, three when he got his first stick. When he was four he was better than the five-year-olds, and when he was five he was better than the seven-year-olds. During the winter following his seventh birthday he got such a bad case of frostbite that if you stand close enough to him you can still see the tiny white marks on his cheekbones. He had played his first proper game that afternoon, and in the final seconds missed a shot on an open goal. The Beartown youngsters won 12–0, and Kevin scored all the goals, but he was inconsolable. Late that evening his parents discovered that he wasn't in his bed, and by midnight half the town was out searching for him in the forest. Hide-and-seek isn't a game in Beartown—a young child doesn't have to stray far to be swallowed up by the darkness, and a small body doesn't take long to freeze to death in thirty degrees below zero. It wasn't until dawn that someone realized the boy wasn't among the trees but down on the frozen lake. He had dragged a net and five pucks down there, as well as all the flashlights he could find, and had spent hour after hour firing shots from the same angle from which he had missed the final shot of the match. He sobbed uncontrollably as they carried him home. The white marks never faded. He was seven years old, and everyone already knew that he had the bear inside him. That sort of thing can't be ignored.

His parents paid to have a small rink of his own constructed in the garden. He shoveled it himself every morning, and each summer the neighbors would exhume puck-graveyards in their flowerbeds. Remnants of vulcanized rubber will be found in the soil around there for generations to come.

Year after year they have heard the boy's body grow—the banging becoming harder and harder, faster and faster. He's seventeen now, and the town hasn't seen a player with anything close to his talent since the team was in the top division, before he was born. He's got the build, the hands, the head, and the heart. But above all he's got the vision: what he sees on the ice seems to happen more slowly than what everyone else sees. You can teach a lot about hockey, but not that. You're either born with that way of seeing or you aren't.

“Kevin? He's the real deal,” Peter Andersson, general manager of the club, always says, and he ought to know: the last person in Beartown who was as good as this was Peter himself, and he made it all the way to Canada and the NHL, matching up against the best in the world.

Kevin knows what it takes; everyone's been telling him ever since he first stood on a pair of skates. It's going to demand nothing less than his all. So every morning, while his classmates are still fast asleep under their warm comforters, he goes running in the forest, and then he stands here, *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Collects the pucks. *Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Collects the pucks. Practices with the junior team every afternoon, and with the A-team every evening, then the gym, then another run in the forest, and one final hour out here under the glare of the floodlights specially erected on the roof of the house.

\* \* \*

This sport demands only one thing from you. Your all.

\* \* \*

Kevin has had every sort of offer to move to the big teams, to attend hockey school in a bigger town, but he keeps turning them down. He's a Beartown man, his dad's a Beartown man, and that may not mean a thing anywhere else, but it means something here.

So how important can the semifinal of a junior tournament be? Being the best junior team around would remind the rest of the country of this place's existence again. And then the politicians might decide to spend the money to establish a hockey school here instead of over in Hed, so that the most talented kids in this part of the country would want to move to Beartown instead of the big cities. So that an A-team full of homegrown players could make it to the highest division again, attract the biggest sponsors once more, get the council to

build a new rink and bigger roads leading to it, maybe even the conference center and shopping mall they've been talking about for years. So that new businesses could appear and create more jobs so that the townspeople might start thinking about renovating their homes instead of selling them. It would only be important to the town's economy. To its pride. To its survival.

It's only so important that a seventeen-year-old in a private garden has been standing here since he got frostbite on his cheeks one night ten years ago, firing puck after puck after puck with the weight of an entire community on his shoulders.

\* \* \*

It means everything. That's all.

\* \* \*

On the other side of Beartown from the Heights, north of the road signs, is the Hollow. In between, the center of Beartown consists of row houses and small homes in a gently declining scale of middle-classness, but here in the Hollow there are nothing but blocks of rental apartments, built as far away from the Heights as possible. At first the names of these neighborhoods were nothing but unimaginative geographic descriptions: the Hollow is lower than the rest of the town, where the ground slopes away toward an old gravel pit. The Heights are on the hillside overlooking the lake. But after the residents' finances divided along similar lines, the names came to signify differences in class as much as in districts. Even children can see that the farther away you live from the Hollow, the better things will be for you.

Fatima lives in a two-room apartment almost at the end of the Hollow. She drags her son out of bed with gentle force; he grabs his skates and soon they're alone on the bus, not speaking. Amat has perfected a system of moving his body without his head actually having to wake up. Fatima affectionately calls him "The Mummy." When they first reach the rink, she changes into her cleaner's uniform and he tries to help her pick up the garbage in the stands until she shouts at him and drives him off and he goes to find the caretaker. The boy is worried about his mom's back, and she worries that other children will see him with her and tease him. As long as Amat can remember, the two of them have been alone in the world. When he was little he used to collect empty beer cans

from the stands at the end of the month to get the deposit back on them. Sometimes he still does.

He helps the caretaker every morning, unlocking doors and checking lights, sorting out the pucks and driving the zamboni, getting the rink ready for the day. First to show up will be the figure skaters, in the most antisocial time-slots. Then all the hockey teams, one after the other in order of rank. The best times are reserved for the juniors and the A-team. The junior team is now so good it's almost at the top of the hierarchy.

Amat isn't on the junior team yet, he's only fifteen, but maybe next season. If he does everything that's demanded of him. One day he'll take his mom away from here, he's sure of that. One day he'll stop adding and subtracting income and expenditures in his head all the time. There's an obvious difference between the children who live in homes where the money can run out and the ones who don't. How old you are when you realize that also makes a difference.

Amat knows his options are limited, so his plan is simple: from here to the junior team, then the A-team, then professional. When his first wages reach his account he'll grab that cleaning cart from his mother and never let her see it again. He'll allow her aching fingers to rest and give her aching back a break. He doesn't want possessions. He just wants to lie in bed one single night without having to count.

The caretaker taps Amat on the shoulder when his chores are done and passes him his skates. Amat puts them on, grabs his stick, and goes out onto the empty ice. That's the deal: the caretaker gets help with the heavy lifting and tricky swing-doors that his rheumatism makes difficult and—as long as Amat floods the ice again after he practices—he can have the rink to himself for an hour before the figure skaters arrive. Those are the best sixty minutes of his day, every day.

He puts in his earphones, cranks the volume as loud as it will go, then sets off with speed. Across the ice, so hard into the boards at the other end that his helmet smacks the glass. Full speed back again. Again. Again. Again.

\* \* \*

Fatima looks up briefly from her cart, allows herself a few moments in which to watch her son out there. The caretaker catches her eye, and she mouths the word "Thanks." The caretaker merely nods and conceals a smile. Fatima remembers

how odd she thought it when the club's coaches first told her that Amat had exceptional talent. She only understood snippets of the language back then, and the fact that Amat could skate when he could barely walk was a divine mystery to her. Many years have passed since then, and she still hasn't gotten used to the cold in Beartown, but she has learned to love the town for what it is. And she will never find anything in her life more unfathomable than the fact that the boy she gave birth to in a place that has never seen snow was born to play a sport on ice.

\* \* \*

In one of the smaller houses in the center of town, Peter Andersson, general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey, gets out of the shower, red-eyed and breathless. He's hardly slept, and the water hasn't managed to rinse his nerves away. He's been sick twice. He hears Kira bustle past the bathroom out in the hall, on her way to wake the children, and he knows exactly what she's going to say: "For heaven's sake, Peter, you're over forty years old. When the GM is more nervous about a junior game than the players, maybe it's time to take a tranquilizer, have a drink, and just calm down a bit!" The Andersson family has lived here for more than a decade now, since they moved back home from Canada, but he still hasn't managed to get his wife to understand what hockey means in Beartown. "Seriously? You don't think all you grown men are getting a bit too excited?" Kira has been asking all season. "The juniors are seventeen years old, practically still children!"

He kept quiet at first. But late one night he told her the truth: "I know it's only a game, Kira. I know. But we're a town in the middle of the forest. We've got no tourism, no mine, no high-tech industry. We've got darkness, cold, and unemployment. If we can make this town excited again, about anything at all, that has to be a good thing. I know you're not from round here, love, and this isn't your town, but look around: the jobs are going, the council's cutting back. The people who live here are tough, we've got the bear in us, but we've taken blow after blow for a long time now. This town needs to win at something. We need to feel, just once, that we're best. I know it's a game. But that's not all it is. Not always."

Kira kissed his forehead hard when he said that, and held him tight, whispering softly in his ear: "You're an idiot." Which, of course, he knows.

He leaves the bathroom and knocks on his fifteen-year-old daughter's door until he hears her guitar answer. She loves her guitar, not sports. Some days that makes him feel sad, but on plenty more days he's happy for her.

\* \* \*

Maya is still lying in bed, and plays louder when the knocking starts and she hears her parents outside the door. A mom with two university degrees who can quote the entire criminal code, but who could never say what icing or offside meant even if she was on trial. A dad who in return could explain every hockey strategy in great detail, but can't watch a television show with more than three characters without exclaiming every five minutes: "What's happening now? Who's that? What do you mean, be quiet? Now I missed what they said . . . can we rewind?"

Maya can't help both laughing and sighing when she thinks of that. You never want to get away from home as much as you do when you're fifteen years old. It's like her mom usually says when the cold and darkness have worn away at her patience and she's had three or four glasses of wine: "You can't live in this town, Maya, you can only survive it."

\* \* \*

Neither of them has any idea just how true that is.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Fredrik Backman is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Man Called Ove*, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, *Beartown*, and a novella, *And Every Morning the Way Home Gets Longer and Longer*. His books are published in more than forty countries. He lives in Stockholm with his wife and two children.

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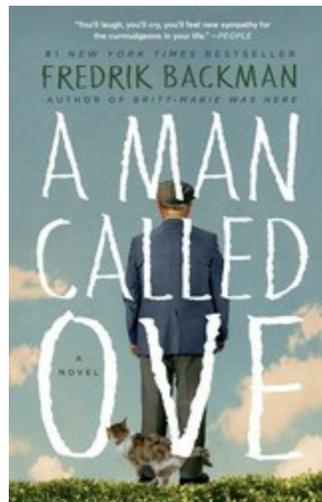
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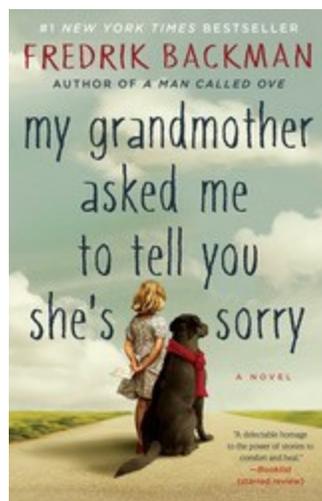
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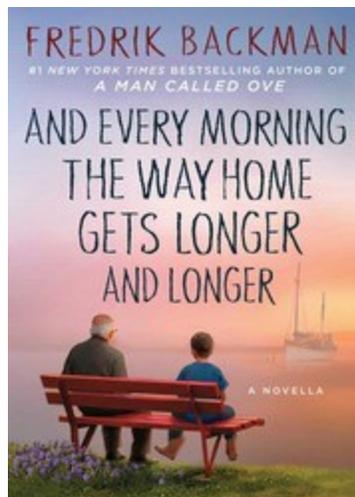
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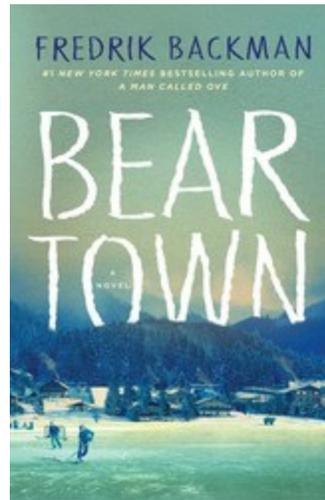


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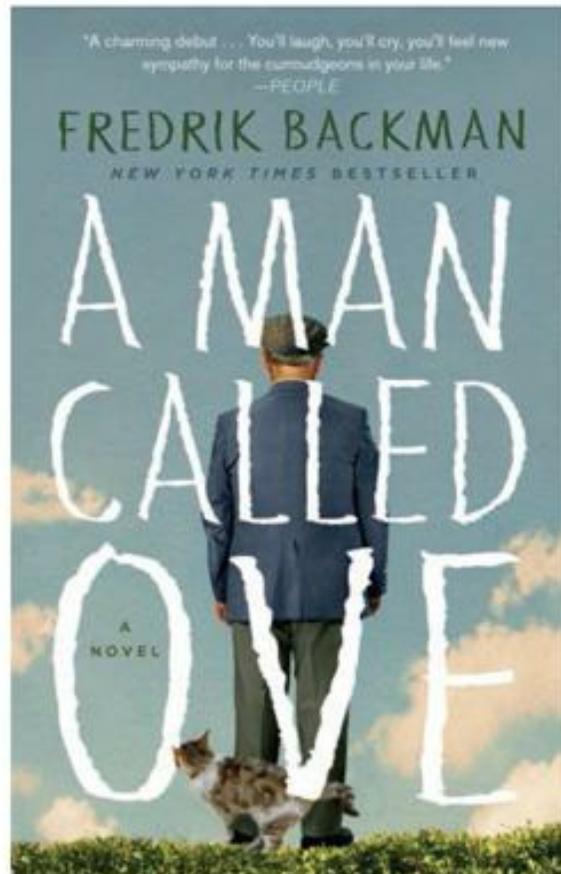
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“A charming debut. . . . You’ll laugh, you’ll cry, you’ll feel new sympathy for the curmudgeons in your life.”

—*People*

“A thoughtful and charming exploration of the impact one life has on countless others—and an absolute delight.”

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“The perfect book.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

ELSA IS SEVEN YEARS OLD AND DIFFERENT.

HER GRANDMOTHER IS A SEVENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD  
TROUBLEMAKER.

WHEN GRANNY ASKS ELSA TO HELP HER APOLOGIZE TO THOSE  
SHE HAS WRONGED, THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME BEGINS.

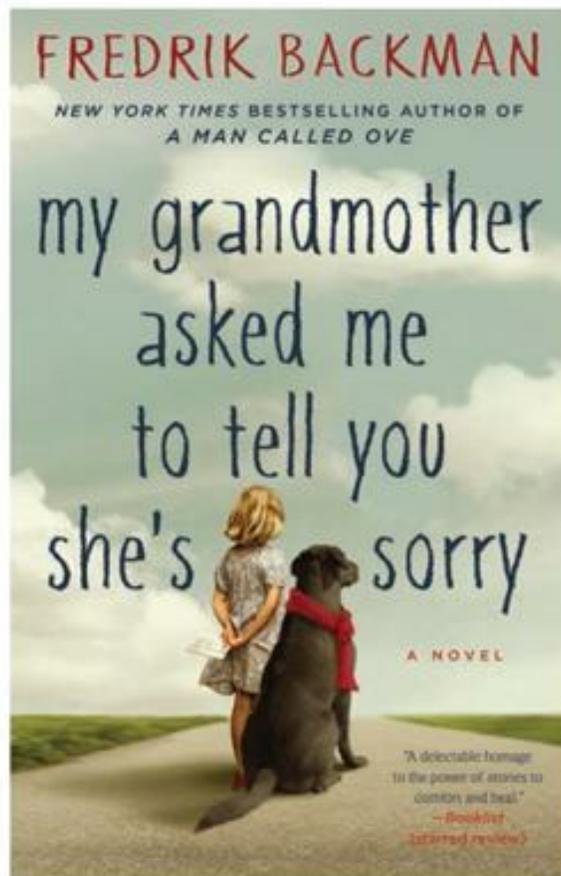


“Believable and fanciful. Backman’s smooth storytelling infuses his characters with charm and wit. . . . A delightful story.”

—*St. Louis Post Dispatch*

“A delectable homage to the power of stories to comfort and heal, Backman’s tender tale of the touching relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter is a tribute to the everlasting bonds of deep family ties.”

—*Booklist (starred review)*



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“Firmly in league with Roald Dahl and Neil Gaiman . . .  
touching, sometimes funny, often wise.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

BRITT-MARIE IS DIFFICULT, DEMANDING, AND SOCIALLY  
AWKWARD.

BRITT-MARIE IS LOYAL, BRAVE, AND HAS A BIGGER HEART  
THAN ANYBODY KNOWS.

BRITT-MARIE IS READY FOR A CHANGE—BUT EVEN SHE WILL  
BE SURPRISED BY WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.



“A brilliant mix of belly-laughs, profound insight and captivating events delivered . . . with Backman’s pitch-perfect dialogue and an unparalleled understanding of human nature.”

—Shelf Awareness

“Heartfelt and truly stirring, *Britt-Marie Was Here* resonates long after the last page is read.”

—*RT Magazine*



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“Insightful and touching . . . a sweet and inspiring story about truth and transformation.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

GRANDPA AND NOAH ARE SITTING ON A BENCH IN A  
SQUARE THAT IS GETTING SMALLER EVERY DAY. THEY BOTH  
LOVE SILLY JOKES, MATHEMATICS, AND UNNECESSARY  
PRESENTS.

AS OTHER MEMORIES FADE, GRANDPA HOLDS ONTO NOAH'S  
HAND SO HE WILL BE THE LAST TO GO.

HERE IS WHERE GRANDPA AND NOAH WILL LEARN HOW TO  
SAY GOODBYE.

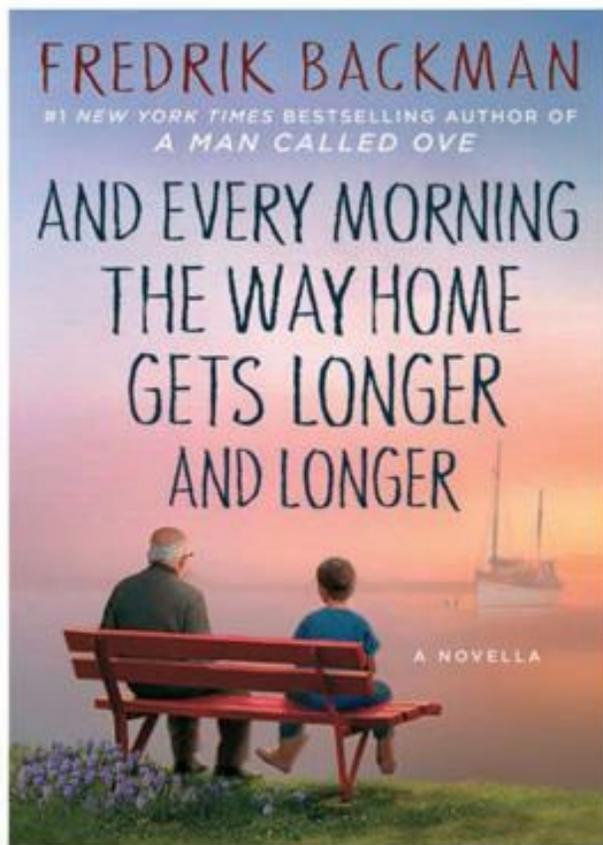


“Winsome, bittersweet . . . wise and heartbreaking.”

—*People Magazine*

“I read this beautifully imagined and moving novella in one sitting, utterly wowed, wanting to share it with everyone I know.”

—Lisa Genova, bestselling author of *Still Alice*



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“A little book with a big message.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

BEARTOWN HAS ALWAYS BEEN TOLD IT IS SECOND BEST.

NOW THEIR JUNIOR ICE HOCKEY TEAM HAS A CHANCE TO  
BECOME CHAMPIONS.

BUT IT'S WHAT HAPPENS OFF THE ICE THAT WILL CHANGE  
THIS TOWN FOREVER.

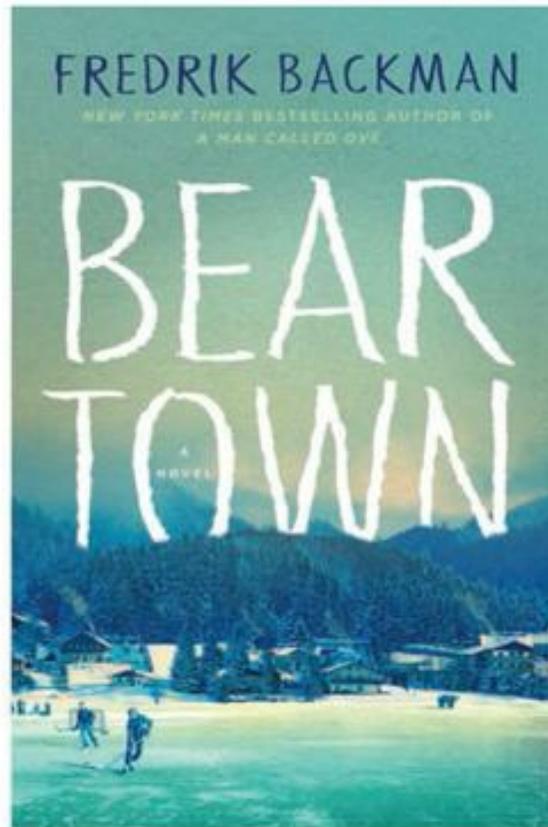


“Backman is a masterful writer, his characters familiar yet distinct, flawed yet heroic. . . . There are scenes that bring tears, scenes of gut-wrenching despair, and moments of sly humor.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[It is] Backman’s rich characters that steal the show. . . . Love, sacrifice, and the bonds of friendship and family that shine through.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*



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“A writer of astonishing depth. . . . The story  
is fully packed with wise insights into the  
human experience.”

—*The Washington Times*

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